

Guessing our colleagues' gay and lesbian identities can be harmful

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Have you ever made assumptions about your colleague's sexuality? Yes, no, possibly? If you have, you are certainly not alone. However, most scholars hold the assumption that non-heterosexuality is hidden or invisible and needs to be disclosed to others (to be known), indirectly inferring that sexual minorities have full control over when, where and how they 'come out' at work.

My [recent study](#) into bullying, harassment and discrimination against lesbians and gay men in six large private, public and third sector organisations in Britain suggests otherwise. The study not only shows that colleagues play a significant part in the coming out process, but they are also likely to reach their own conclusions about sexual identities. By no accounts am I suggesting that the ability to read someone's sexuality is a problem per se, but problems can arise when identities and stereotypes are either matched or mismatched. Let me explain why this is the case.

As a starting point, lesbians and gay men have far less control over the disclosure process than previously recorded. Questions about partners can provoke disclosure of sexual identity, so can unwanted sexual attention, exposure to homophobic remarks and personal crisis affecting work performances. In these situations, colleagues not only aid disclosure (e.g. with questions or remarks), they can also inflict disclosure as lesbians and gay men try to fend off assumptions about heterosexuality.

That said, some behaviours and personal circumstances seem to trigger suspicions about non-heterosexual identity amongst colleagues, such as being 40+ and still unmarried, failing to talk about boyfriends or girlfriends, being too 'private' or simply being associated with other lesbians, gay men or bisexuals at work.

Yet some lesbians and gay men believe that their sexuality is unmistakable, claiming that they are 'obviously gay' or look like a 'typical lesbian'. They also accept that these ideas are based on stereotypes of lesbians and gay men,

ideas which were shared by most of my interviewees, generally portraying lesbians as 'not feminine', 'quite plain' and 'not beautiful' and gay men as 'loud', 'effeminate' and 'flamboyant'. Colleagues seemed equally attuned to these stereotypes, creating different problems for lesbians and gay men.

Aside from being measured against these stereotypes, lesbians and gay men were punished in different ways for being 'too gay' or failing to be 'real' lesbians. For gay men, embodying the gay body, fully or partly, seemed to carry expectations about looks, interest and skill sets, which could limit their choices at work and shape interactions with colleagues. For example "irritating" behaviour could be framed as a fundamental part of being gay, and gay men were not asked to carry out tasks which were typically given to other men.

The situation was different for women. When they seemed to deviate from stereotypical assumptions about the lesbian identity, problems could arise. These women had one thing in common. They had all been assumed to be heterosexual on the basis of how they looked. Coming out to their colleagues proved problematic at best. Largely because the authenticity of their sexuality was questioned, but an equally important reason is that they were likely to be the object of male sexual attention.

All things considered, it's important to remember that some lesbians and gay men may still need to come out for their sexuality to be known, but for others, disclosure may not be necessary. Yet the freedom to express lesbian and gay identities at work is still heavily restricted by organisational demand for heterosexuality and a set of expectations about non-heterosexual identities.

With that it is easy to understand why academics have been unwilling to draw attention to stereotypes, as it may run the risk of reinforcing them. I take a different view and argue that without engaging with stereotypes it is impossible to challenge the prejudice they are effectively based on. Under no circumstances am I suggesting that 'straight acting' gay men and 'typical' lesbians do not face negative behaviour at work. Rather that feminine gay men and lesbians may be more likely to cause offence in organisational contexts that demands heterosexuality.

In the case of gay men: heterosexual men seem to have their masculinity undermined by the 'effeminate' gay body. By contrast, women who do not seem to fit lesbian stereotypes seemed to face different challenges, usually of a sexual nature. In their case, heterosexual masculinity is evoked in the sense that lesbian women were no longer available to men, yet positioned as objects of male desire.

Perhaps we have arrived at a moment in time where lesbian and gay employees are accepted in the workplace as long as they do not upset what their colleagues see as "normal" gendered and sexual practices' (Buijs et al., 2011: 647). As for bisexuals, their challenges seem more far-reaching. In truth, lesbians and gay men rarely discussed bisexual identities (unless they were a part of the sequence lesbian, gay and bisexual), further cementing their invisibility and the marginal status of bisexuality within and outside of the non-heterosexual community.

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Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper: [Fitting the bill? \(Dis\)embodied disclosure of sexual identities in the workplace](#), co authored with [Helge Hoel](#) and [Duncan Lewis](#), in *Work, Employment and Society*, June 2016 vol. 30 no. 3 489-505
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Anna Einarsdóttir is a senior lecturer in organisational behaviour, theory and technology at the York Management School, University of York. Her research interests include gender and sexual identities; social and organisational (in)justices; critical diversity management and social movements. Anna has published widely in the area of same sex relationships as well as bullying, harassment and discrimination faced by lesbian, gay and bisexual employees. Anna has recently been awarded an ESRC grant with Professor Karen Mumford and Professor Yvonne Birks to research LGBT employee networks within the NHS.



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